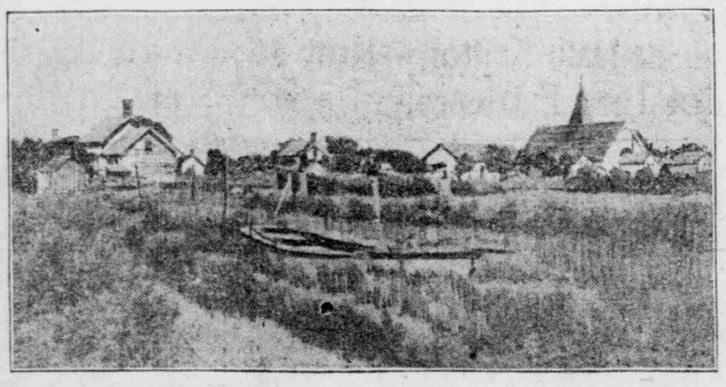
TANGIER ISLAND, HOME OF THE LUSCIOUS SOFT-SHELL CRAB



The Little Methodist Church.

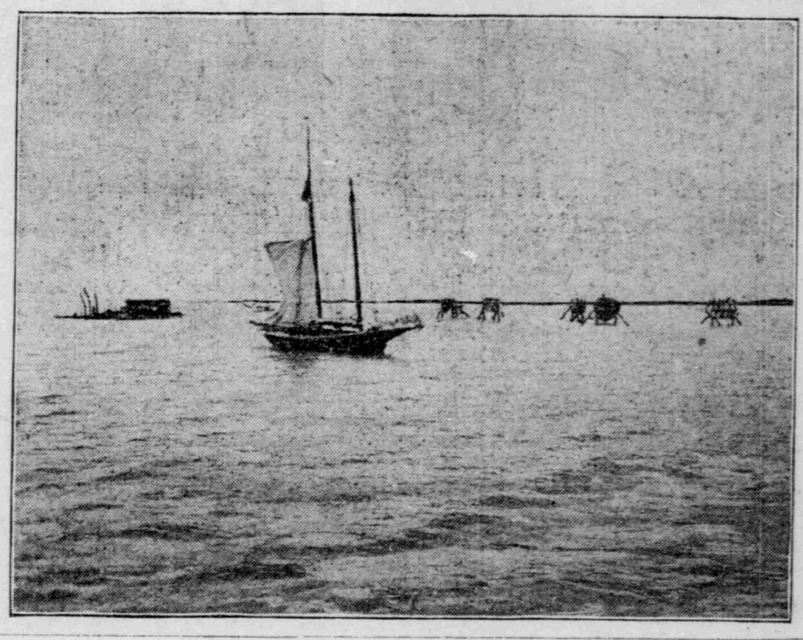
Northern Portion of the Island, Locally Known as Canaan.

A Typical Fisherman's Home.

The Quaint Old Town on the Sound Whose Inhabitants Live in a Little World of Their Own, and Whose Sole Source of Support Is Fishing for the Delicious Sea Food. ♀ ♀ ♀ ♀ ♀

Ah'm talkin' 'bout yo' hard crab;
Ah'm talkin' 'bout yo' soft crab;
Ah'm talkin' 'bout yo' devil' crab;
Ah'm talkin' 'bout yo' pocketbook.
—Cry of the Street Vender.

King Street, the Only Street in the Island, Is One Mile Long and Nine Feet Wide.



The Landing Stage Is One Mile Off Shore.

From Monday Morning Until Saturday Night the Entire Male Population of the Village Is Afloat, Eating and Sleeping Aboard Their Boats. Odd Things to Be Seen by the Visitor. ♀ ♀ ♀ ♀

WITH the development of the country, the increase in population, and the consequent increased demand for sea foods, there comes a suggestion that with no larger area from which sea foods can be obtained, we are nearing a period when the soft-shell crab will become like the terrapin, the property of the epicure, who can satisfy his palate without regard to the drain upon his pocketbook.

The terrapin has become an article of food that belongs strictly to the tables of the wealthy. To cultivate an appetite for this expensive species of sea food requires an income sufficient to provide for an expensive table, for terrapins are from $50 to $60 per dozen, and the supply is becoming less each year. Finding a diamond back terrapin in the locality in which the best terrapins are found, is like finding a $5 gold piece, as a terrapin can easily be exchanged for $5 at any of the little stores which abound in the terrapin country, provided it measures up to the standard size.

Following the Terrapin.

The soft-shell crab seems destined to follow the path of the terrapin, although at the present time no immediate danger is felt about such a scarcity of supply as will make the prize prohibitive, but the demand is constantly on the increase, the territory from which this kind of sea food can be obtained is limited, and unless transportation facilities are improved to such an extent that the crabbing grounds are brought nearer to the markets, the familiar cry of the street vender who disposes of crabs in their season will become a thing of the past, and only the wealthy class can afford this toothsome dish upon their tables.

The crab season is a long one, continuing in this city from the latter part of March until the middle of October, and from the time of the withdrawal of the oyster from the market in the spring until the bivalve again appears in the fall, the soft-shell crab is a popular article of sea food. The commonplace clam may be more healthful and nutritious, but is lacking in popularity when placed in the standard of comparison along with the crab.

In the early part of the season the crabs used in this city are obtained from the Atlantic seaboard below Norfolk, some of them being obtained as far south as on the coast of North Carolina. As the season advances and the waters of the Chespeake Bay become warmer the crabs are secured from nearer points, such as Annapolis, Crisfield, Md., and Norfolk.

The transportation methods enter largely into the selection of a suitable shipper of crabs for the local markets. This variety of sea food suffers greatly from handling and carelessness in packing and shipping, and those shippers who use the greatest care in the shipment of crabs, and whose crates arrive in the city in the best condition are sure of steady customers, and are usually well supplied with orders from the best dealers. From about the 10th of June until the last of July—the period of the greatest activity in the crab trade—the shipper has all the business that he can well attend to if he has good business tact and strives to keep his dealer supplied with the best in the market.

Sold by the Count.

From the time that the crab is taken from the water until the delivery to the consumer the catch is subjected to a count. On the crabbing grounds the crab fisherman sells his catch at 3 cents per crab. The shipper invoices the crabs by the dozen to the dealer, by whom they are again disposed of by count in quantities to suit the purchaser. It is therefore necessary that the crabs should arrive in the hands of the local dealer in good condition, in order that as small a loss as possible occurs between the receipt of the commodity and its sale to the consumer.

The crabs are packed in shipping crates containing two trays, in which they are arranged with great care and carefully covered with seaweed or seagrass. It is necessary that these crates be kept cool during transportation, and with the best of care crabs can be kept alive only for a short period, ranging from three to seven days. The best temperature seems to be about 50 degrees. Ice water, or an attempt to cool by packing with such quantities of ice that the drippings from the ice reach the crabs, kills the crabs quickly, and this loss falls upon the dealer.

One of the largest shipping points for soft shell crabs is Crisfield, Md., on the Chesapeake Bay. This section has been noted for several years not only for the quality of the crabs shipped, but also for the care taken in packing and shipment, and although the distance is somewhat greater than from other points, the quality of the goods when received is of such a superior class that the town of Crisfield has built up a thriving industry in the shipment of all classes of sea food.

Tangier Bay Crabbing Grounds.

The waters of the Chesapeake Bay, in that locality known as Tangier Sound are the favorite crabbing grounds of the South, and to such an extent has this peculiar industry grown, that several firms are located at Crisfield, who have not only built up a large business in handling sea food taken from the waters of the Chesapeake, but some have opened canning and shipping factories at points along the coast of North Carolina, where the work of collecting and shipping sea food is carried on at seasons when the cold weather has placed the more northern waters out of the area of production.

During the season, looking out from Crisfield toward Tangier Island, just as the day is breaking, the sound seems dotted with the sails of a large fleet of tiny boats slowly sailing up and down over the crabbing grounds. In this work there is no labor union to fix the hours of work, and as usual in such cases the harder the work the larger the amount of the earnings for the week, the longer the work is continued the greater the profit, and the "early to bed and early to rise" maxim is not only believed in but practiced on Tangier Sound during the crabbing season.

Always a Good Market.

The crab fisherman is fortunate in some respects. He is not obliged to seek a market for his catch, and at the present rate of consumption there seems to be no danger of an overproduction. The only thing the future has in store is the fear that the supply will some day be so limited that at the prices which the catch will bring on the ground some will have to seek other means of a livelihood, and this to the crab fisher will be a serious matter, for they have fished all their lives, and have followed in the steps of their fathers and grandfathers, and this to them seems the only occupation suited to their abilities.

The life of a crab fisher is full of hardships and denials. He must be willing to work early and late whether it is rainy or fair, he must be content to live upon the boat for six days of the week, to subsist upon the plainest and coarsest food, cooked in a tiny cabin by a chef who is usually a younger son, and whose knowledge of cooking is as immature as the years which have fitted him for this work. He must be content to remain away from his family from early Monday morning until the following Saturday afternoon when the early closing hour seems in vogue, and day after day sail over the same course, see the same boats, the same crews, the same daily routine of catching and selling crabs.

And yet after all this the crabbers seem to be a contented race, and attend to their business with a steadfastness which would surely secure a small measure of success if turned to other pursuits.

Catch Sold to Agents.

The catch of the crabbers is usually sold on the crabbing grounds to the agents of the shippers who are on hand with their boats to purchase the crabs as soon as they are taken from the water. In this way the crab fisher is not troubled about the perishable nature of his product, as it is soon taken off his hands, and a record made of each sale, for which payment is made on Saturday of each week. The customary price paid by the shippers is 3 cents per crab, and at this rate of compensation the earnings of a boat with two men will range from $25 to $45 per week.

A large number of the crab fishers reside on Tangier Island, on the west of Tangier Sound, and about ten miles from Crisfield, Md., which is situated on the opposite side of the sound. Here is a community of some 1,400 people who derive their living from the waters of the sound, and from this island nearly every man and boy of sufficient age to follow the life of a crabber is absent from before daylight on Monday morning until the following Saturday afternoon, when the fleet of fishing boats turn toward home and remain anchored near the island until the time for departure on Monday morning.

A Quaint Community.

The conditions on this island are exceedingly primitive. The island has been inhabited since 1686, when a family named Crockett settled there. This family has been prominent in the history of the island ever since, and the descendants of that name have become so numerous that to address a letter to Capt. Thomas Crockett would involve the postmaster in a quandary more difficult than any of the rules of the Postoffice Department to understand, but if you are wise and know that this particular Capt. Thomas Crockett is a descendant of John Crockett, and address your letter to Capt. Thomas Crockett of J. (son of John), the letter will be promptly delivered.

Legend of Piratical Days.

Notwithstanding that Tangier Island seems to be nearer to Crisfield, Md., than to any other town, the island belongs to Accomac county, Virginia, and depends upon Virginia for its laws and protection. Although there is a suggestion that in the early history of the island it was the resort of pirates, the present inhabitants at first deny emphatically such rumors, and afterward in confidence admit that there is an unauthenticated story that at one time pirates did stop there on their excursions up and down the bay.

Whether the present Tangerians have any trace of the blood of pirates, or whether they can trace their ancestry to more reputable sources, is of little consequence. The present occupants of the island are not only law abiding, but seem to be a very exemplary class of citizens and appear to have demonstrated the fact that a community does not need lawyers to insure peace and freedom from lawlessness. It is true that the citizens have organized a society for the prevention of lawbreaking, known as the Law and Order League, but this society seems more of an advisory than of a prohibitory character, although its officer, known as the policeman, is supposed to keep order on the one road, or rather lane of the island.

But it does not seem that this officer has any authority to make an arrest, and the extent of his power seems to consist in warning offenders, and in making a list of the lawbreakers and of such persons as have witnessed the unlawful acts, and preferring charges against the offenders on the occasion of the next visit of the legal representatives of the State, who make occasional visits to the island for the purpose of weighing out justice.

A Town of One Street.

The one road or lane referred to is officially known as King Street, but locally referred to as "the road." Along this narrow street, which is only nine feet wide, are located the five stores which exist on the island; a majority of the dwellings, the one church of the Methodist denomination, and a barber shop. This comprises the business and the residence portion of the town, and although the road is a long one and the turnings are somewhat abrupt in places, the duties of the one policeman are not arduous, and as he happens to be a Crockett, and one of the eldest of the residents of the island, in this instance he is regarded as a man of wide information.

Neatly Painted Houses.

Although the island has been inhabited for more than 200 years there is nothing to indicate that this is an old village. The buildings are all of wood, and with the customary habit of the sailors for painting at every possible opportunity, these buildings have either been remodeled or repainted so frequently that there is no appearance of age or decay, and the house that suffers from a lack of paint is a novelty in Tangier.

Another peculiar feature that makes this island distinctively a novelty is the fact that it contains no large wharf on the water front. At the end of the long street, and at a point nearest the landing stage, may be found a small wharf less than ten feet square; this is the largest wharf in Tangier. It contains nothing in the way of a roof for protection, or a seat upon which the traveler may rest while waiting for the small boat to convey him to the landing stage, fully a mile distannt. But travelers are few and far between, and the wharf seems to be sufficient for the present demands.

The Doctor and the Minister.

Among the professional men may be counted the village doctor and the minister. The doctor states that the inhabitants are wonderfully healthy, and the minister has no cause for complaint, for he occupies the best house in the village, and the church is the social as well as the religious center of the life of the islands. The islanders are, as a class, devoted to religion. In Tangier to be without the pale of the church is to be outside of the pale of good society. As a result nearly all of the inhabitants belong to the Methodist Church. The example of the belief in the church as a necessity is illustrated in the manners of the people. One may walk up and down the one street of the village for days without hearing a profane word. Profanity is not only unpopular but unprofitable. "It costs $5 to swear on the road," remarked a Tangerian who was giving some information about the island. The enormity of the crime and the high price of the indulgence added a solemnity and terror to his tone.

Not an Agricultural People.

Agriculture is not indulged in to any extent, and the small plots of ground belonging to each house are in most instances left uncultivated. It is true that there are no horses or wagons on the island, but it is also true that the cost of supporting a family when everything that is placed upon the table is purchased at the little store could be greatly reduced if the planting of little gardens was encouraged, and vegetables provided for the table.

The early use of boats is a part of the education of every native of the island, boys and girls, men and women, all are acquainted with the use of boats. Each home is connected with the waters of the sound by a tiny canal, which ends in the back yard of the home. This canal is the road to the world beyond, to the markets, to the fuel supply, to everything not found on the island.

Return of the Fishing Fleet.

The return of the fishing fleet on Saturday afternoon is a subject worthy of the efforts of a master painter. This is the great day of the week for those who are worldly-minded. In the afternoon the sun-bonnets and calico gowns of the women are abandoned for garments of a better class. The children are scrubbed and dressed in their best and made ready for the arrival of the father and the brother who have been absent all the week. Young girls select their brightest ribbons and attempt marvels in the way of hair dressing, and feet which have felt the freedom of barefoot primitive ways, are pinched into shoes that are at once a cross and a delight. Across the sound the boats are turning homeward. To a stranger they are very similar in appearance. To the watchers they are easily recognized and distinguished, and long before sundown all the boats are securely anchored, and a forest of tiny masts surrounds the water front of the island.

Saturday a Gala Night.

Saturday night is the grand gala night of the island. The stores during the night are crowded and business thrives. Young men in their best clothes, accompanied by their sweethearts struggle for a seat in the one room annexed to a store where ice cream is sold. Soda water of the bottle variety is the only beverage dispensed on the island. To sell beer or other drinks is a greater crime and a more expensive sin than profanity, and notwithstanding the reputation which seafaring men have for a fondness for drink, Tangerians seem to be the exception to the rule.

Sunday on Tangier Island is a day of unusual solemnity, and seems to be fully equal in the severity with which it is observed to the Sundays of the Puritans. From an early hour in the morning until sundown, with but a reasonable intermission for the Sunday dinner, a service of some kind is in progress at the church.

The One Dinner at Home.

The Sunday dinner, however, is the great feast of the week. It is the only dinner of the week that the crab fisher is permitted to eat with his family, and on this account all of the ingenuity of the housewife is taxed to make this event one to be remembered. With these people there seems to exist a feeling that this may be the last meal that they will eat together, and without doubt the danger of the labor is greatly magnified, for but few meet death by drowning, but they fail to remember this fact, and strive to make the love of home shine through a well-loaded table.

To those who are tired of the world, who mourn the daily grind and toil of life, who lament the roughness of the way and the hardness of their lot, there exists a valuable object lesson in the lives of these simple fishermen who find so much delight in the few hours of the week they are permitted to spend with their families and in the worship in God's house on the Sabbath, and who so bravely turn away from home long before the break of day on Monday, and take up the toil of another week, in that hardest of pursuits, that of earning a subsistence from the products of the sea.

THE LITTLE ATTIC ROOM.

In the cottage of my father was a little attic room,
Where the unmolested spider wove his silver trap of doom
For the flies that sought the sunlight by the single windowpane,
And buzzed a lazy, hazy, day's-enough-for-me refrain;
And I used to seek that attic, of its shadows unafraid,
And view the shattered glories that were everywhere displayed;
The broken fragments of the past, stray bits of light or gloom,
That were wont to haunt and hold me in that little attic room.

The sword my grandsire carried on the fields of Mexico;
An epaulet unmated, making still a tinsel show;
An ancient trunk, fur covered, as a tree is clad in bark,
So old I had a notion that Noah bore it in his ark;
The corn that hung in strange festoons from rafters brown and bare—
The years might come, the years might go, that corn was always there;
A shoe my Uncle Sammy wore—I never saw his face—
These, and a thousand things beside, were in that attic place.

I can't explain the charm it bore, that that homely room, for me,
Although perhaps 'twas somewhat like a living memory.
But often when my mother thought that I with urchins played,
I dreamed among its shadows, by their phantoms undismayed;
And I seemed to hear the patter of ghostly feet that pressed
The rough floor of the garret where their treasures lay at rest;
The treasures that they cherished while their lives were still in bloom,
Ere they sought the dust and cobwebs of the little attic room.

Somewhere within the heart of man, in sunlight or in gloom,
I fancy there is ever found a little attic room
Where he keeps the broken treasures of an unforgotten past—
A tiny shoe, a fractured doll, a ship without a mast;
Half hid by cobwebs of the years, they all are waiting there,
And he views them with a dreamy smile or sometimes, with a prayer.
As the olden faces greet him, with their never-changing bloom,
While he sits among the shadows of his little attic room.

—Alfred J. Waterhouse, in New York Times.

The Point of View.

GEORGE HOWARD GIBSON.

To be looked up to, honored and respected,
And draw an income from the class subjected;
To grasp a measure of superior power—
Through wealth, or law, or what seems mental dower—
And feel in worth above one's serving neighbors
As much as one can profit by their labors;
To live secure from want, with cultured classes,
And give employment to the landless masses:
So to be served and saved makes class and station
Seem natural, and good for all creation.

To be looked down on—reckoning worth by wages;
To work and want through all life's hopeless ages;
Long hours, long years to toil among wealth makers,
And still remain dependent on its takers;
To sweat for others who yet do not love us,
Creating incomes for the ranks above us;
To live a treadmill life, with narrow pleasures,
Unthrilled by art, and wanting all its treasures:
So with the rich to rank in correlation,
Seems not so fair and fine for all creation.